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Maintainers winning air bridge battle

Article and photo
by SSgt. Andrew Biscoe

Their "normal" workload is nose-to-tail maintenance of 16 of the Air Force's largest aircraft. These days during Operation Iraqi Freedom, that work is nearly doubled with the surge of C-5s at Westover.

For the crews of the 439th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, the work has just begun when a C-5 aircrew steps out of their three-story high cockpit following a long trip across the Atlantic.

Maintenance vehicles swarm around the armada of C-5s as AMXS men and women inspect the 247-foot-long Galaxy. As if the complexity of the huge aircraft isn't enough, there are the elements to contend with too — starting with an unrelenting and bone-chilling blast of subzero temperatures in February. And the schedule can seem to be even more relentless.

"One'll come down, we'll jump on it," said SSgt. Anthony Gambardella, 439th AMXS crew chief, as he frequently finds himself scrambling from one airlifter to another.

"The next thing you know there's another one, and you get that one ready. It's a constant rotation." Everyone works on whatever Galaxy touches down on the runway — whether it is from Lackland, Dover, Travis, Stewart or here.

Gambardella works four 12-hour day shifts. His day begins at 5:45 a.m. "Then we get our days off and start all over again," he said. He knows the C-5s haul vital supplies anywhere on the earth, and that includes the troops fighting in Iraq. Gambardella believes the long hours and demanding maintenance required for the C-5s are well worth the effort. "We're supporting the troops," he said with a smile. "If I could be over there (in Iraq), I would be."

Last year, Westover maintainers worked the C-5 maintenance air bridge at Moron AB, Spain during three-month rotations. This time around, Gambardella and the more than 300 other men and women with AMXS are home. They work Westover's flight line — the East Coast hub for all C-5s heading across the ocean, and returning. Since Feb. 2, when the 24-hour surge of aircraft began, the flight line is among the busiest of any Air Force flight line in the country. As many as 27 C-5s



SSgt. Blayne Lum, 439th AMXS, checks the instruments of a Travis AFB C-5B.

have lined the ramps that stretch all the way around past the Base Hangar.

"You might hear that there are one or two airplanes coming in and the next minute you got six," said TSgt. Bob Cirillo, an air reserve technician crew chief. "You have to be ready for it. We've been able to turn the airplanes around and still have enough room for more to come in."

The AMXS crews, activated since Feb. 17, see that the C-5 crews have their aircraft ready to go for the next mission. The transports don't always stop for refueling. Every time a C-5 lands or takes off, there is a new inspection sticker. The pilots fly the plane, but the aircraft doesn't fly until it's signed off.

SSgt. Blayne Lum regularly works on C-5A and B models. "You get to learn different models from the A to B, and there's all different kinds of equipment updates that some of these have," he said. "Whatever comes down from Bandit 6 or 7, we're on it."

Lum's "office" is the C-5 cockpit, loaded with a myriad of electronic switches and gauges. He monitors all of the avionics on the C-5s such as autopilot and navigation.

Gambardella sees the biggest reward when a 350-ton C-5 takes to the air. "It's knowing that we did our job the best that we could to get the thing off the ground," he said.

"It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of hours... there's a lot of knowledge out here, and a lot of experienced people. That's what it takes. This is the only place that I know of that when something needs to get done, everybody comes together as a team. They disregard any obstacles. If the job needs to get done, we're going to get it done."

The integration of the Lackland maintainers has been one more example of the success story at Westover, said Lt. Col. Christopher Skomars, 439th MXG deputy commander. "It's a huge success. These folks from Lackland are doing a heck of a job. It's a seamless operation." The statistics tell the story. "We're launching upwards of 15 aircraft per day. They've easily doubled their workload," he said.

CMSgt John Budenas, AMXS first sergeant, said the credit goes right to the troops on the flight line. "They are really out there pushing the mission 24 hours a day," he said.

"They take great pride in what they do. They're in the frigid cold and rain and sleet. I am really proud to serve with those folks. Westover maintenance puts the spear in the air. Without us the tip of the spear wouldn't hit the target in Iraq. They do it because they

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439th AW MISSION: Actively support national objectives on a global scale with ready, mobility forces

Maintainers... (Continued from page 1)

take pride in their work," the first shirt said.

MSgt. Charles Keller, a C-5 crew chief since 1986, is among 160 maintainers deployed here for six months from the 433rd AW, Lackland AFB. "It's better here than it is downrange," Keller said, adding that many of the 433rd crews are working in Moron and Rota Spain, handling the C-5 maintenance on the other end of the world.

Cirillo looked out at the flight line during an unexpected pause in the action on Tuesday. "It's kind of a little relief," he said. "We're still going to be in this awhile."

And as long as they are doing so, the effort continues to catch the attention of those people in charge at Air Mobility Command at Scott AFB, Ill. Skomars said the Westover maintainers have earned praise from the highest levels of the headquarters staff on down.



PATRIOTS BOOST CELTICS—AJ Gontarek, son of club manager Kevin Gontarek (left), shows his fan support going to the Celtics-Pistons game Wednesday. Eight busloads of Westover hoop fans received free tickets to see the Celtics win 99-92.

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Aerial porters, 15 others called to duty

by MSgt. Tom Allocco

Another 55 Reservists, most of them members of the 42nd Aerial Port Squadron, were called to active duty on Tuesday.

An MPF mobilization line in the Dining Facility processed 40 aerial porters, 11 members of the 439th Communications Squadron, two members of Wing Safety and one each in the Military Personnel Flight and Family Support Center.

The communications specialists called to active duty include members assigned to computer support, communications security and runway communications support.

Almost all of the activated 42nd APS aerial porters had previously served at least two months on days in support of 24-hour operations since the start of the Enduring Freedom surge in February. They include the full gamut of aerial port specialties to keep C-5s, equipment and troops moving, including members to support loading operations, ATOC, passenger services and fleet services.

Lt. Col. James Carey, 42nd APS commander, expressed confidence in the ability of his aerial porters to carry on the grueling air bridge mission. "We've been here 60 days. We know what's going on. We're ready for anything they throw at us," he said.

Among the activated aerial porters was TSgt. Philip Nadeau who is employed as a manufacturing engineer at V.S. Tsubaki, Chicago.

During Desert Shield and Desert Storm he served here nine months with the 42nd Red Hats. From last June through September he was with 21 other aerial porters at Al Udeid AB, Qatar.

Nadeau will serve as the aerial port liaison to the Command Post. He volunteered for activation, he said, "to protect the country, to keep my 22 nieces and nephews free."

MSgt. Tim Williams had been serving as NCOIC of Passenger Services since the first day of the surge. A Delta Airlines senior

customer services agent, he served here nine months during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He also served with the aerial porters at Al Udeid last year.

The aerial porters, Williams said, will continue to do what they have been doing.

"That's the reason we wear the uniform, to do the job. And we have the opportunity to do the job," he said.

Congressman Neal visits

Bay State Congressman Richard Neal (D-Springfield) visited Westover on April 15. Brig. Gen. Martin M. Mazick, 439th AW commander, hosted the congressman's visit.

Mazick, the group commanders and the Command Chief Master Sergeant Jeffrey B. Sherwin briefed Neal on Westover's role in Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. The congressman also heard about the impact of the mobilization on Westover reservists.

Mazick took Neal on a tour of Hangar 3, where Neal met USO volunteers and reservists in the passenger terminal. Neal also received a 42nd APS red squadron hat from Lt. Col. James Carey, 42nd APS commander.

Pat Stats

Served since Feb. 2, 2003

3,894 passengers - 1,308 aircraft

14,132,933 pounds of cargo

Info from MSgt. Jim Garrity, 42APS

Meals

7,014 hot meals served

Box lunches: 4,345

Info from TSgt. David Beauregard, 439SVS

Fuel since Feb. 1

7,669,618 gallons of JP-8

Info from Jim Maloney, Fuels

Express-ions

